

# Arrogant Charity Is no Charity

**Jeroninio Almeida** says the real joy of giving is all about having a win-win mindset

**I**t is not mindless, arrogant charity but humble, involved social justice that is wanting in our world.' This is my motto and the inherent belief that led me to conceptualise and create The Joy of Giving movement a decade ago. The idea was to try and encourage a change in mindset at a mass level, and to provoke a thought process about social justice – which is essentially about universal fairness and equality – for one and all, and not just opportunities for a few.

Why do I say 'mindless arrogant charity' as against 'humble, involved social justice'? Islamic prophet Imam Ali asked, 'What are human beings so arrogant about? Our origin is a sperm, our end is a carcass and in between we are a vessel for excrement.' In that light, it makes one think about how ordinary we are, mere mortals, who in the end go from ashes to ashes, and dust to dust. This should humble us enough to realise our space and live with humility. However, most people in today's world think that humility is weakness and arrogance is powerful.

In a world where everything seems to be going wrong, the apathetic question that most people ask is, 'What can I do?' Few believe that they can actually do 'something' that makes a difference to our world – but this because, today, there is little focus on human values, and much more on materialistic values. Doing 'something' is not about giving a little money and believing that one has changed the world. Rather,

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## **Humble social justice instead of arrogant charity**

Many people are in the habit of giving money – say, to a children's foundation – and then boasting about it in their social circles. They give the money, get a tax receipt, and then wait for a glossy report. Most people who sponsor a child do not bother to visit him or her even once. This lack of accountability is what allows much of the money to get siphoned off, and for some NGOs to even sell the donated clothes and supplies in the second-hand market. This amounts to nothing more than

giving money to a child begging at one traffic light, and then forgetting about him or her by the time you reach the next light. Leave alone changing the world, the reality is they may not even be impacting the life of a single child. Far more worthy would be to actually look into the child's progress, demand accountability, and ensure that he or she is truly empowered to live a life of dignity. Very few people make such a commitment, and the majority practice what might be called 'arrogant charity' – which only works to make you feel good and enjoy your materialistic life by thinking you have 'done your bit.'

It is amusing to hear such people boast – usually over cocktails during the Joy of Giving week – about how much money and clothes they donate to charities. The sad reality is that they do not even know what is happening with the children of their house-help or drivers, and nor would they have bothered to even get their domestic staff basic medical insurance to help them – or their families – cope with illness. To truly experience the joy of giving, one needs to also empower the people who work for you.

## **Do not give just for the sake of giving**

During the 2004 Tsunami, many people came forth to donate money. About 10,000 people died in the disaster, and while much international aid poured in, most of it was squandered – because the fact is that the money was not really needed.

What, though, about the 'Tsunami of hunger' that claims thousands of lives every day? Why are we blind to that, while we continue living our opulent, ostentatious lifestyles? We observe Earth Hour, take pictures in darkness, put them up on Facebook and claim that we have done our bit to 'save Earth' and then spend the rest of the year with every light on in every room in our house. Many businesses follow practices that usurp people's natural resources, impoverish communities, displace or harm millions (including children) and damage the environment – but then pay lip service to CSR by feeding a few hundred children. This is not only arrogant, but faddish charity.

## A 'Joy of Giving mindset'

What does it mean to have a humble, win-win social justice mindset that lies behind the Joy of Giving? Let me just provoke a little thought by asking you to imagine this:

- By taking a bucket bath instead of a shower 3-4 times a week, we

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may save over 1,000 litres of water, which can go to people who have no access to safe water.

- If we use electricity prudently, the power we save may be made available to poor children, who might be able to learn better and

achieve more in life.

- By buying our house-help a medical insurance policy, we can ensure they have access to good healthcare when they or their children fall ill.
- Engaging with the children of our domestic help and local slums, and counselling them on their school- or career-progress, is like gifting them better opportunities in life.
- If we can get together with our neighbours, friends and associates to clean our neighbourhoods once a week or month, we can help create a cleaner society.
- By teaching our children human values and fundamental duties to practice 'Individual Social Responsibility' (ISR), we will move towards a more just, humane, egalitarian and responsible society.

This is what I mean by a win-win mindset. A better world is possible, but we need to go beyond just donating a little money. As Mahatma



Gandhi said, 'There is enough for everyone's need but not enough for anyone's greed.' The real joy of giving is about social justice, fairness and equal opportunity for one and all, and if we can think it, we can achieve it. However, it all begins with 'I': I change to change India; I move myself to move the world.

## True stories of extraordinary courage

In my Karma Kurry book series, as well as at a recent talk I delivered at a UN forum, I narrated several stories of 'ordinary heroes' who are creating extraordinary change. Four of them have never been to school, and yet, are creating livelihoods and opportunities for millions of people.

Subhashini Mistry lives in Hanspukur village, 20 km from Kolkata's city-centre. Her husband, a labourer, died of gastroenteritis in the 1970s. Soon after his death, Subhashini decided that she would not let anyone else face the kind of difficulties she had to face due to a lack of healthcare. She had to bring up her five children and keep her own body and soul together. Over the next twenty years, she toiled as a housemaid, manual labourer and vegetable seller, managing to save Rs 20,000. Meanwhile, with help from philanthropists, she managed to educate her son Ajoy Mistry to be a doctor. She was also able to get the residents of Hanspukur to pool together money and establish a 'humanity trust'. The money was used to buy a half-acre of land and start a hospital in a small hut. Today, the hospital provides healthcare to thousands of needy people while Subhashini continues to sell vegetables and live a humble lifestyle. The question to ask ourselves is, how many of us can say that we have provided healthcare to even 10 people who have worked with us in our households? That is the real joy of giving.

Fr. George Pulikathiyil, runs Jananeethi, an organisation that fights for human rights through the

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judiciary. Based in Thrissur, Kerala, Jananeethi has to date helped hundreds of thousands people and even transformed the Thichur ward in Thrissur to a litigation-free village. 'My mission is to make justice administration a mass movement. Protection of human rights should be part of a people's culture,' says

Fr. George. 'We step in when nobody else can or will file a case,' he continues. In a country where top Supreme Court lawyers say that nothing can be done until you grease the judges' palms, Fr. George and his community have filed – and won – cases without paying a single bribe. How many of us are willing to stand up for what is right and do things the 'right way', such as not paying capitation fees or asking for favours to secure school admissions for our children? Do we have the integrity to file an application through the RTI rather than use short cuts? That is the real joy of giving.

Tulasi Munda was born into a poor tribal family, a day before India attained independence, in the remote and impoverished Serenda region of Orissa. She learned to read and write by herself. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, Vinobha Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan, she decided that the only gift she could give to her people would be education. Thirty-five years ago, she



established a school under a tree, selling puffed rice to raise money for it. Over the years, the school has educated over 25,000 people, and her organisation, Adivasi Vikas Samithi, which runs the school, has 16 outreach centres in the villages of Keonjarh district to help make primary education accessible to the poor. The question to ask ourselves is, how many of us can say that we have educated and empowered even one child, who is not our own, to find their place in the sun?

Sixty-nine year-old Chewang Norphel stands on the bund of a 'Zing' (or reservoir) that he built in Phey village near Leh. Chewang designs and builds artificial glaciers at heights of 13-15,000 feet above sea level by refreezing the glacial melt. His technique is simple and cost effective. At about Rs 300,000 per glacier, it is also the only hope for the water-starved region of Ladakh. A few years ago, I was invited to address students at IIT, Guwahati about how each of them could make a difference in our world. The night I reached IIT, I happened to meet one of the senior professors there, who argued that building artificial glaciers defies the laws of engineering. Rather than debating with him, I gave him a copy of the project manuscript and asked him to read up on how Chewang does it. The next morning we met over breakfast, and he asked me very sheepishly how the project succeeded. I told him the secret: because Chewang never went to school, he does not know the laws of engineering and his thoughts are therefore unconstrained. The question to ask is, how many of us can say that, with all of our education, we have had the courage to even make an attempt with one simple, selfless idea that would make a difference to the lives of many?

Lakshman Singh's village, Lapodiya, is 65 km from Jaipur, on the way to Ajmer. Lakshman helps rural communities to implement traditional water conservation and natural resource-management sys-

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tems His ingenious water-harvesting methods have made the village drought-proof and poverty-free, and he is working hard to return control over water resources to the rural youth and citizens, replacing centralised government planning with self-reliance and local pride. Starting from his home village, Lakshman has spread his ideas across more than 200 other villages, benefiting over 350,000 individuals. Lapodiya has over a million trees and 180 different varieties of birds. Laxman never went to school and has no clue what modern agricultural science or environmental engineering are – and yet, he has created opportunities, livelihoods and wealth for millions. Today, budding environmental engineers and agricultural scientists from around the world come to learn from the humble wisdom of Lakshman Singh. The question to ask is, how many top entrepreneurs and wealth creators can claim to have provided opportunities and dignified livelihoods to the un-served communities of India?

### A mantra for change...

There are many other stories of ordinary, everyday heroes that will feature in the Karma Kurry series of books. None of us can do everything, but each of us can do something. Even if the 'something' is

very small, the idea is to get involved and experience the real joy of giving. Yes, there are several things going wrong in our society and the world more generally, but it is time to stop being indifferent and apathetic and change our mindset. Each of us has the power within to right wrongs in our own space and time. If we begin to do this, then together, we can right every wrong – and that is when we shall truly enjoy the real joy of giving. It is by including the need to serve society in our purpose of life that you will notice how fulfilling your life can be, in every dimension. You can unleash the power and greatness within you and become extraordinary and limitless, because if our everyday heroes can do it, then so can you.

Try to experience the real joy of giving, and this will help you find contentment, happiness and your purpose in life. Remember, one can never invent the purpose of life, but only discover it while doing something meaningful and contributing to the greater good. Go beyond money. Get involved. Be committed. Think win-win and fairness for all. You have the power to make a difference. If you can think it, then you can do it. In the words of the great Hans Selye, 'To make a great dream come true, you must first have a great dream. A long, healthy, and happy life is the result of making contributions, of having meaningful projects that are personally exciting and contribute to and bless the lives of others.' Let us all go out there, dream more, get inspired and inspire others to be the change. Together, as one, we can right every wrong by experiencing and spreading the real joy of giving. ■



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